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Toward a Semiotics of Nicknaming
*The Kamsá Example**

The more the esthetic function predominates in the act of naming, the more unique, that is, limited to the given case, is the designation that springs from it; hence the close relationship between the esthetic function and metaphorical naming.

—Jan Mukařovský[1]

NICKNAMING PRACTICES are widely distributed, and everywhere contoured to the cultural matrices in which they operate. This article is concerned with those nicknaming traditions productive of humorous or derogatory appellations attached to the name bearer through fortuitous circumstance. The discussion to follow, while restricted to one manifestation of a ubiquitous signing mechanism, should nonetheless provide a preliminary framework for dealing with the more general problem of nicknaming.

The English word "nickname" comes to us from the Middle English "an eke name" meaning "another name." Etymology thus alerts us to the fact that nicknames stand in opposition to some other naming conventions. The aggregate of all naming units that account for the distribution of personal names within a society will be referred to as the naming system. Naming systems consist of this aggregate of naming units, along with the necessary stipulations regarding the distribution and application of each naming technique.

While nicknames and other kinds of names can be described partially in isolation from their naming systems, there are many advantages to locating

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[1] Jan Mukařovský, "The Esthetics of Language," in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style,* ed. Paul Garvin (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1964).

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them within their systemic contexts. In the following pages, I will explore the nicknaming practices of the Kamsá indigenous community of Andean Colombia and locate these practices within the broader context of the Kamsá naming system, in order to identify the distinctive features of nicknaming as opposed to other Kamsá modes of personal reference and address. The Kamsá community is a pastoral and horticultural community of some three thousand individuals residing in the Sibundoy Valley (Putumayo Territory) of Southwestern Colombia. The Kamsá language is a language isolate.[2] Spanish and Inga, of the Quechuan family, are also spoken by some members of the community.

Personal Reference and Address

There are four units to be considered here: the legal name, the kinship term, the *jajoka wabainá* or garden name, and the *podeska wabainá* or ugly name. These four units carry the burden of personal reference and address in the Kamsá context (along with pronouns, which are not treated in this paper). The legal name, the garden name, and the ugly name are the principal components of the Kamsá naming system. Garden names and ugly names may be categorized as nicknames, though only the latter fully exemplify what I hope to establish as the nicknaming semiotic. Kinship terms are not proper names at all, but rather shifters (see below), and they constitute an interesting limiting case for parts of the analysis to be presented below.

Legal Name. The legal name has two components: the Christian given name, drawn from the familiar repertoire of Spanish saints' names, and the family name, stemming from the now extinct matrilineal clans. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish Capuchins at the beginning of this century, the Kamsá apparently resided in matrilocal descent groups, and these lineage names are preserved in the contemporary family names.[3]

The legal name is attached to the bearer through the Catholic rite of baptism, administered by the priest, in the church of one of the nearby towns usually within the first year of life. The legal name is used as the individual moves into the educational and legal institutions of the national culture, but it is rarely heard within the confines of the Kamsá community. One occasionally hears complete legal names in intragroup settings, and the given name by itself is retained as a common means of reference and address within the extended

[2] Cestmir Loukotka, *Classification of South American Languages* (Los Angeles: University of California in Los Angeles, 1968). The Kamsá phonological system is outlined in the Appendix.

[3] Victor Daniel Bonilla, *Servants of God or Masters of Men? The Story of a Capuchin Mission in Amazonia* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1972).

family. Legal names have remained largely extraneous to the community for two reasons: they are a cultural transplant introduced to "civilize" the Indians, and they are referentially weak, incapable of adequately distinguishing individuals in the community. The corpus of both family names and given names is a limited one, producing a significant overlap of individuals claiming the same legal name. The sharing of legal names is not a problem in out-group communication, since ties with the outside are sufficiently limited to minimize ambiguity of reference. Within the community, it is the nickname that carries the burden of personal reference.

Kinship Terms. Kinship terms are used for personal address, literally when the interlocutors are in fact next of kin and figuratively when they are not, always providing that the conversation takes place primarily among Indians. I will not pause to reproduce the Kamsá kinship system here; instead, I present some explanations regarding the figurative use of kinship terms. The procedure is rather straightforward. If the person to be addressed is a member of the indigenous community and a male, the term *taitá,* "father," is obligatory; the comparable term for a female is *mama,* "mother." These will be the only terms used if the two interacting parties are of equal status. If the addressee is of an older generation, or otherwise of higher status than the addresser, the term *bakó,* "uncle," will be added, producing the combination *taitá bakó,* "father uncle," in the case of a male addressee. The comparable term for a female addressee is *batá,* "aunt," which is preposed to *mama* to produce the combination of *batá mama,* "aunt mother." If the addresser perceives the addressee to be of lower status, or of a descending generation, the terms used are *taitá sobrén,* "father nephew," for a male addressee, and *base mama,* "little mother," for a female addressee.

Kinship terms are thus shifters, or linguistic labels that adjust to concrete aspects of the speech situation.[4] They are particularly associated with Kamsá social or ritual language, a prayerful oratory recited during formal, ceremonial occasions, and also during everyday social rituals such as greetings and leave-takings. All personal address in this language variety is accomplished through the office of kinship terms.[5]

Garden Name. The *jajoy* is a cultivated plot of land producing the Kamsá staple foods, especially corn and beans. The *jajoka wabainá,* "garden name" (*-ka* is a locative suffix), is selected from a limited reserve of appropriate names

[4] Roman Jakobson, "Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb," *Selected Writings,* vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

[5] See my "Kamsá Ritual Language," in preparation.

and attached to the bearer by the maternal grandmother within the first few years of life. This name is for use within the immediate family, including the child's maternal aunts and uncles, where it may persist even into adulthood. These names are seen as mildly humorous but in no way derogatory to the name bearer.

The complete set of *jajoka wabainá* uncovered by my research is presented below:

wakiñá (Kamsá)	son
bobonse (Kamsá)	young man
mozo (Spanish)	boy
pasado (Spanish)	past (governor)
boyanga (Kamsá)	husbands (*-nga* is the plural marker)
tatanga (Kamsá)	fathers
tastanga (Kamsá)	fathers (mispronounced)
tatash (Kamsá)	father (mispronounced)
tateko (Kamsá)	father (also an exclamation)
bembe (Kamsá)	daughter
shema (Kamsá)	woman
mujera (Spanish *mujer*)	woman
mameta (Spanish *mamita*)	little (dear) mother

The two terms I have labelled as mispronounced probably represent adult imitations of childish articulation. The term *mujera* may be preceded by either *btse,* "big," or *base,* "little."

Ugly Name. Ugly names are highly productive of embarrassment and amusement among the Kamsá. They are regarded as sufficiently derogatory to the name bearer that they may not be spoken in her or his presence. I discovered the inflammatory nature of the ugly name by nearly revealing to a Kamsá friend the nicknames of his father and sister. Only a timely nod from my Kamsá host prevented this serious breach of etiquette. The Kamsá suppose that most bearers of ugly names are aware of their names, but it is still quite discourteous to mention an ugly name in the presence of its bearer or his kin. Confrontations of this kind were said to result in fighting or in long-term grudges.

While precise data are unavailable, I suspect that as much as two-thirds of the adult Kamsá population are blessed or cursed with ugly names. My corpus of ugly names consists of some two hundred entries gathered through fieldwork with my host family. The names either derive from some serendipitous event, wherein the name bearer allegedly exhibits some form of controversial or revealing behavior, or they point to some physical irregularity of the name bearer, which may be virtually anything that sets her or him apart

from the norm. Ugly names are typically accompanied by one or more explanatory anecdotes, accounting for the link between name and name bearer. There is no institutional procedure for establishing the name bond, nor is there any class or person institutionally endowed with the power to create this bond.

Ugly names are not drawn from a limited inventory of resources. Instead, they are coined spontaneously in a display of verbal artistry, and grounded in the astute observation of human frailty. Ugly names draw attention to marginal behavior at variance with the local etiquette, but they rarely touch on serious antisocial behavior. The ugly name often exemplifies what Kenneth Burke has termed strategic naming, wherein the proposed name represents an attempt to impose a particular interpretation on a multifaceted event.[6]

Scope, Sense, and Nomination

In order to specify the semiotic constitution of the appellation units just described, each unit will be subjected to a three-pronged analysis. We shall ask of each unit:

(1) What is the scope of name use?
(2) What, if any, is the sense of the names employed in this unit?
(3) How do these names become associated with their name bearers?

Scope. The issue of the scope of name use has two facets. In the first instance, we may inquire into the sociological boundaries of name use, delineating the social categories favorable to it and those that constrain it. In the second instance, we must account for the bifurcate capabilities of personal names, which may serve both as a means of personal reference and as a means of personal address. This distinction between the referential and vocative functions of name use was formalized in the case systems of the classical Indo-European languages;[7] in Kamsá as in English, there are paralinguistic rather than overt grammatical markers to distinguish the two functions.

Legal names among the Kamsá serve both the referential and the vocative functions, but they are restricted largely to out-group communication. In conversational encounters involving a mixed ethnic constituency, the Kamsá Indian will present himself as the bearer of a legal name and respond when summoned by that name. He will also make reference to other members of the indigenous community by their legal names in this context. However, the legal

[6] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), p. 3.

[7] John Lyons, *Semantics*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 217.

name has little scope within the indigenous community itself. It is rarely heard in its entirety; only the given name appears regularly, used in the extended family as a term of reference and address.

Kinship terms in their literal and figurative uses are heard exclusively in the context of intragroup communication. In this respect they present a contrast with legal names, reserved essentially for out-group communication. In their literal use they serve both the referential and vocative functions. The term used to refer to a relative is not always the same as the term appropriately used to address this person. Thus one's son-in-law is referred to as *atxe-be bebenco,* "I-possessive son-in-law," while this same individual is addressed as *basa,* "little one." Kinship terms in their figurative usage appear exclusively as terms of address. These honorific titles, such as *taitá bakó,* "father uncle," serve the vocative but not the referential function.

The garden name is employed within an even smaller social orbit, a subset of the indigenous community. These names are used within the immediate family as terms of reference and address. Finally, the ugly name may be used throughout the entire community, but strongly restricted to the referential function. Like the kinship term, the ugly name may not extend beyond the limits of the Kamsá community, but unlike the kinship term, the ugly name may not serve as a means of personal address.

There is very little duplication in the scope of these discrete naming units. Coordination of social sphere and semantic function produces a usage profile unique to each naming unit. These data are summarized in the chart below:

	Scope of Name Use	
Unit	*Social Sphere*	*Semantic Function*
legal name*	extracommunity	referential, vocative
kinship term	intracommunity	——
literal	——	referential, vocative
figurative	——	vocative
garden name	immediate family	referential, vocative
ugly name	intracommunity	referential

* In its entirety; note that the given name does operate within the community.

Sense. It has long been argued that proper names lack sense. Thus, according to John Stuart Mill, they are meaningless marks with a denotative but no connotative capacity.[8] Proper names represent, then, a special case of referring expression: they refer without describing. Other modes of single, definitive

[8] John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (London: Longmans, 1843).

reference (reference to a specific individual), such as definitive noun phrases, are open to descriptive content.[9]

Recently, John Searle has proposed an escape from the paradoxical situation of reference without description. He suggests that while proper names do indeed lack descriptive content, they are supported by a descriptive backing "available on demand." The descriptive backing for proper names consists of a number of propositions concerning the identity of the name bearer. If the referent of a proper name is in doubt, the descriptive backing can be brought forward in the form of identifying descriptions. In this way people can in theory (as they often do in practice) ascertain whether they in fact have the same referent in mind. Searle presents the descriptive backing as a social composite, rather than a single set replicated intact throughout society.[10]

Searle also turns his attention to vernacular naming traditions producing what he calls "degenerate proper names." Referring to a name of this sort, "the Bank of England," he observes, "For these limiting cases of proper names, it seems the sense is given as straightforwardly as in a definite description; the presuppositions, as it were, rise to the surface."[11] In the nickname, too, the presuppositions (those propositions contained in the descriptive backing) rise to the surface. The special province of the nickname is to make manifest an unorthodox descriptive backing.

The units within naming systems might be expected to display a differential quantity of manifest descriptive backing. Some naming units might be relatively free of descriptive backing, while others might be saturated with it. Each unit of the Kamsá naming system presents a distinct relationship between the semantic content of the name and its descriptive backing. Not only does the degree of manifest descriptive backing vary, but the character of the information conveyed in the name varies from one unit to another as well.

The legal name conveys a fairly significant amount of information, though only a small part of it actually belongs to the name's descriptive backing. Most of the information conveyed is etymological and historical. The saint's name recalls the life of the saint and the past history of the name within the community, among other things. Yet these sorts of data are generally irrelevant to the actual identity of the name bearer. The manifest descriptive backing of the

[9] Farhang Zabeeh, *What is in a Name? An Inquiry into the Semantics and Pragmatics of Proper Names* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968).

[10] John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

[11] Ibid., p. 173.

legal name consists in only a few broad sociological elements: the bearer's sexual identification, and his or her familial affiliation.

The kinship term is itself an identifying description, but paradoxically it contains very little manifest descriptive backing. The amount of information conveyed by these terms is negligible, consisting only of the elements of gender and generation. Moreover, unless the kinship term is anchored to a nonshifting referent, its assocation with its referent is tentative and unstable.

The garden name conveys information which is again restricted to a few basic elements: gender, stage of life, number, and sibling order. Of these elements, only gender accurately reflects the identity of the name bearer. The other details may enter into the descriptive backing, but more often they fail to do so, since the garden name promotes deliberate misrepresentation of its referents. Thus a child may be called "fathers" even though he is in fact only one person and not an adult. Here, only the element of masculinity matches the actual features of the bearer's identity. The humor of these names lies precisely in the disparity between the authentic descriptive backing and the semantic content of the name.

Ugly names convey a great deal of information, and in their case the semantic content of the name derives from the authentic descriptive backing. The distinctive feature of the ugly name is its selection of controversial descriptive information. Those portions of the descriptive backing least flattering to the name bearer find articulation in the ugly name. Thus a man who might be identified by a score of positive attributes is identified in the ugly name in terms of negative attributes. Herein lies the fundamental discourtesy of the ugly name: the Kamsá ugly name is an unkind identifying description.

The sense of Kamsá names can be specified as the interplay of two factors: the amount and kind of information conveyed in the content of the name, and the degree of coincidence between this store of information and the authentic descriptive backing. The legal name presents a limited corpus of information, mostly of an etymological character. The only elements of manifest descriptive backing present in this corpus are bearer's sex and family affiliation. The kinship term presents very little information, and the bond between the term and its referent is contingent and shifting. Garden names offer little information and even less descriptive backing, since they often misrepresent actual bearer identities. In all three cases, the names approximate the proper name prototype, which holds the descriptive backing in abeyance, to be presented on demand.

In contrast, the ugly name conveys substantial amounts of information, tending to coincide with the descriptive backing. In these names, the descrip-

tive backing rises to the surface. In contrast to the other units in the naming system, the ugly name seizes on controversial or downright socially deviant elements within the descriptive backing. For many ugly names, the companion anecdote constitutes an essential element in the descriptive backing. The manifest descriptive backing may resist interpretation in the absence of these etiological tales.

Nomination. Inspired by John Austin's seminal work, speech act theory has come to assume an important role in sociolinguistic analysis. The concept to be drawn on here is nomination, defined by John Lyons as follows: "by saying that X nominates some person as John we shall mean that X assigns the name 'John' to that person."[12] Two kinds of nomination are distinguished. *Didactic nomination* entails "teaching someone, whether formally or informally, that a particular name is associated by an already existing convention with a particular person, object, or place."[13] *Performative nomination* is accomplished by a speech act that establishes a naming convention, that is, establishes a bond between a verbal label and an object where none had existed before. The notion of a performative speech act is based on the capacity of language to transform, and not merely to depict, reality. As Austin observes, "when I say 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' I do not describe the christening ceremony, I actually perform the ceremony."[14] In the same vein, performative nomination does not describe an act of naming, but actually establishes a naming convention.

Typically, performative nomination can only be accomplished under appropriate conditions. As Lyons maintains, "One cannot assume the role of name-giver just when and how one pleases."[15] He states that "performative nomination, whether formal or informal, may be determined by certain culturally prescribed conditions of semantic appropriateness."[16] The power to establish naming conventions is associated in mythology with the culture hero, and in human societies this power is typically institutionalized.

Performative nomination in the case of the Kamsá legal name is the province of the priest. In the Catholic ceremony, the priest utters the explicit performative sentence, and the bond between name bearer and name is made effec-

[12] Lyons, p. 217.

[13] Ibid.

[14] John Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[15] Lyons, p. 218.

[16] Ibid., p. 221.

tive. The performative act here is restricted with respect to time, location, and personnel. The garden name offers an instance of informal performative nomination. No ritual action is required to make the naming bond effective. The only two restrictions are that the name giver is customarily the maternal grandmother, and that the names are selected from a narrow inventory of classificatory labels. Performative nomination is hollow in the case of the kinship term, since the bond between term and reference is axiomatic, following from the cultural organization of genetic relatedness. The figurative use of kinship terms offers a weak analogy to performative nomination, one that need not concern us here.

For both the legal name and the garden name, the only rule of semantic appropriateness provides that those elements of the descriptive backing manifest in the name content must effectively coincide with the name bearer's actual identity. Only the basic social categories of gender, family, sibling order, and the like need to be taken into account. For both of these naming units, the moment of performative nomination is precise and definitive.

For the ugly name, it is generally difficult to pinpoint the moment of performative nomination. The majority of ugly names are bestowed by anonymous donors. While it would be possible in theory to reconstruct the process whereby a particular ugly name came to be associated with its bearer, this kind of information is in fact highly perishable. There is no institutional procedure for accomplishing performative nomination with these names. Instead, the names characteristically earn their own way into general usage by virtue not only of their semantic appropriateness, but more important, of their aesthetic appeal. For it is oral tradition, that nebulous composite of concrete transactions, that finally bestows the seal of acceptance.

I have mentioned that Kamsá ugly names are often tied to narrative anecdotes. These miniature etiological tales inform us how the bearer got his name. They rationalize, even legitimize, naming bonds adopted into oral tradition. The truth value of these tales is variable, and not really a salient issue. They substitute, in some acts of didactic nomination, for the missing act of performative nomination. This is precisely what occurred when I elicited ugly names and their complementary anecdotes from my Kamsá associates. In doing so, I simply tapped into a preexisting convention of information transfer.

The Art of the Nickname

Performative nomination is felicitous only when a condition of semantic fit obtains between the descriptive backing manifest in the name and the social

and biological identity of the name bearer. The nickname too is subject to this stipulation, and even though many nicknames incorporate an inverted or exaggerated descriptive backing, my Kamsá hosts invariably assume that an actual trait in the name bearer's appearance or deportment underlies and motivates his association with a particular ugly name.

In addition to semantic appropriateness, the nickname exhibits aesthetic qualities conducive to its assimilation into oral tradition. The art of the Kamsá ugly name resides in its brevity, its texturing of the acoustic environment, its allusiveness, and its piquancy. Not all of these qualities must be apparent in every name, but any comprehensive aesthetic grammar of Kamsá ugly names would be obliged to take account of at least these four qualities.

Brevity. Kamsá names are rarely unwieldy. They may occasionally consist of a few words, but the great majority are single-word utterances of one to four syllables.

Acoustic Texturing. The texturing of the sound medium in ugly names manifests two effects of present concern, though observations here are tentative pending a comprehensive account of ordinary phonological patterning in Kamsá discourse. First, the phonological component appears to be highly patterned in the ugly names, which are frequently saturated with an unusual degree of phonemic repetition. Second, stress and slack syllables are deployed to create a palpable metric effect in many ugly names. Some ugly names display these effects only marginally, while others, like *pikelulo* and *pilipinchá,* display them more prominently. In names like these the phonological component operates at the expense of the semantic component to produce instances of unbridled sound play. Even so, my Kamsá associates detect in these concocted words shadow meanings interpretable as their manifest descriptive backings.

Allusiveness. Kamsá ugly names compare their referents to animals, plants, inanimate objects, and parts of the human anatomy. This richly metaphoric vocabulary reflects a deep involvement with the natural environment, something akin to what Claude Lévi-Strauss terms the science of the concrete.[17] In my limited corpus of ugly names there are references to twenty-three different animals, and to twelve different kinds of plants. The inanimate objects referred to by the names are deeply endowed with cultural meaning. Among them we find: *sunduloja* (the woven belt); *bwananuxe* (the traditional grinding stone); *tabalichub* (the traditional wooden stool); and *orilletxá* (a rough-hewn wooden plank).

The corpus of Kamsá ugly names is a treasury of native metaphor, reaching

[17] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

to the very roots of the Kamsá cosmology. Exploitation of this native store of imagery promotes a mode of signification which might be characterized as sly and indirect. The ugly name presents its unorthodox descriptive backing through the use of indirect reference, or what Mukařovský calls metaphorical naming.[18]

Piquancy. Kamsá ugly names draw attention to social deviance. The descriptive backing manifest in the name content includes identifying descriptions of an unflattering nature. But the name bearer is classified as an insider rather than an outsider by virtue of the ugly name, since these nicknames are attached only to members of the indigenous community.[19] The names display a fundamental ambivalence toward the behavior they depict. On the one hand, these behaviors, taken collectively, comprise a Kamsá antiworld, an inventory of improperly guided behavior.[20] The categories of deviance cited in the ugly names (and presented below) stand in opposition to ideal patterns of behavior. Not every ugly name refers to deviant behavior, but those that do invoke this universal pattern of stigmatization.[21]

On the other hand, the Kamsá attitude toward these behaviors is one of benevolent amusement rather than moral indignation. The very utterance of the names is a mildly deviant act, because of their marginal status and their often obscene content. Moreover, the ugly names constitute in part a mocking of moral standards and exemplars of morality. There is an unmistakable undercurrent of celebration in the names, a recognition of the transcendent vitality of the community. While some of the names are founded on the observation of actual events, others are apparently speculative, depicting potential rather than actual modes of deviation from community norms. The corpus of ugly names thus bears a functional resemblance to the trickster cycle, also dedicated to the exploration of actual and possible modes of deviancy.[22] The bearers of ugly names thus acquire through their names something of the aura of the trickster, a deviant figure who is nonetheless deeply expressive of the community's

[18] Mukařovský, p. 62.

[19] Cf. Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1963).

[20] See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 21–26.

[21] Roger Abrahams, "Man as Animal: The Stereotype in Culture," *Folklore Preprint Series,* no. 4 (Bloomington: Folklore Students Association, 1976).

[22] Barre Toelken, "The 'Pretty Language' of Yellowman: Genre, Mode, and Texture in Navajo Coyote Narratives," *Genre,* 2 (1969), 211–235.

ethos. Significantly, the Kamsá exhibit the same response to the performance of both of these expressive forms, one of enthusiastic mirth.

The categories of deviance cited in the Kamsá ugly names are as follows:

(1) *Physical characteristics* (accounting for 27% of the corpus). The Kamsá attend in the ugly names to aspects of physical abnormality, including shortness, tallness, obesity, baldness, curliness of hair, etc.

(2) *Speech behavior* (accounting for 38% of the corpus). The Kamsá attend closely to idiolectal differences, some of which are probably classifiable as speech defects.

(3) *Dress and grooming* (accounting for 15% of the corpus). The names point to general unkemptness, as well as to the invasion of foreign modes of dress.

(4) *Sexual conduct* (accounting for 12% of the corpus). Men and women alike are cited for sexual promiscuity.

(5) *Control of bodily waste* (accounting for 4% of the corpus). Individuals are stigmatized for their failure to execute these functions properly.

(6) *Food habits* (accounting for 3% of the corpus). Remarkable culinary habits such as making *chicha* (home brew) out of the wrong ingredients are cited in ugly names.

(7) *Antisocial behavior* (accounting for 3% of the corpus). Habitual fighting and stealing are grounds for ugly names.

The category of deviance most often cited in ugly names is the violation of accepted modes of speech. Names applied on this basis exhibit a metalinguistic character, being ways of speaking (ugly names) about ways of speaking (the alleged departures from normal speech). In concluding this section, I reproduce some names and their companion anecdotes from this category, in order to illustrate three salient points: (1) the particularity of the antiworld established by the names; (2) the interplay of the various facets of the aesthetic grammar propelling the names into currency; and (3) the indirect mode of signification that the names display.

One peculiarity of speech often cited in the names is the tendency to conflate separate phonemes in certain phonological environments. While learning Kamsá I had difficulty distinguishing /sh/ from /x/. Each is a voiceless fricative, the latter a retroflex articulated slightly anterior to the point of articulation of the former. I took some comfort in the two ugly names given below, incorporating a speaker's alleged proclivity to substitute /sh/ for /x/ in word-final position:

keshoshá "cheese" (Kamsá f. Spanish *queso*)
A woman said *keshosh* for the correct *keshox*.

tajosh "carrot"
A man says *tajosh* for the correct *tajox.*

In some names, the alleged phonological error intersects with the semantic code in order to produce near-obscenities:

watungebé (*-bé* is the nominal classifier for round objects)
A man has a speech defect (*wasungebé* is "testicles").

To compound the humor, this person is generally accorded the Spanish *don,* which gives us *don watungebé,* roughly "Sir Balls."

Lexical errors cited in the ugly names sometimes involve a speaker's alleged tendency to generalize a particular term beyond its appropriate scope of reference:

fxenduja "yuca"
A man habitually refers to all vegetables as yuca.

Excessive code switching is lampooned in the following ugly name:

machaska "drunk" (Inga: *macha* = v. to drink: *-ska*-perfective)
A man is known to mix together Kamsá, Inga, and Spanish to an improper degree.

Note that the word *machaska* is itself from the Inga language; this name, thus, has an ironic twist to it.

The final example I will present deals with an infelicitous performative speech act; here I was able to interview the wag responsible for coining this ugly name eventually adopted into oral tradition. The story refers back to a *minga,* a collective labor party involving the host in certain important obligations toward his workers.

This man was hosting a *minga* on his land, and he spoke at great length of the hens and turkeys he would slaughter to feed the workers. He told us how he would wring their necks so they could be plucked and cooked. The day of the *minga* came and there was nothing in the way of meat: just potato soup. So we were talking among ourselves and I gave him the name *tamoxbwine,* "bloody neck."

All four dimensions of the ugly name aesthetic are operative in this example. Its brevity is exemplary. The probable acoustic texturing includes a fronting of vowels (/a,o/ → /i,e), and a pleasing alternation between stops /t,b/ and nasals /m,n/, with the retroflex fricative /x/ occupying a pivotal position. The name presents a disturbing allusion, which is mitigated only when we come to realize that the bloody neck in question is that of a nonexistent fowl. Finally,

the name points to a significant breach of contract. The collective labor force is vital to Kamsá agriculture, and it rests on the mutual obligation between host and worker. The name *tamoxbwine* signals this major breach of contract through indirection; only with the aid of the companion anecdote are we able to interpret properly the veiled descriptive backing manifest in the name content.

A Semiotic Profile of the Nickname

Viewing Kamsá ugly names in the context of the entire naming system brings into prominence the distinctive nature of these nicknames. To summarize the distinctive aspects:

(1) Ugly names serve a referential, but never a vocative, function.

(2) In the ugly name the descriptive backing rises to the surface;

(3) this manifest descriptive backing contains propositions of an unflattering character.

(4) In the ugly name, there is no institutionalized procedure for performative nomination,

(5) nor is there a social category institutionally entitled to bestow the name.

(6) Instead, the ugly name earns its own way into circulation,

(7) on the basis of its native aesthetic qualities,

(8) namely, those of brevity, acoustic texturing, allusiveness, and piquancy.

Nicknaming traditions evince a sensitivity with respect to the employment of a nickname as a term of address, and in some settings even their use for reference is proscribed. In Saramaka, the use of one kind of nickname as a term of address may be understood as a challenge to fight.[23] Arab villagers in Jordan use nicknames despite an explicit prohibition against them in the Koran ("neither defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames").[24] Ward Goodenough observed that in Truk "nicknames descriptive of some personal attribute are common, but are not usually used in the presence of those to whom they apply."[25] Even when nicknames are flaunted as tokens of positive self-identification, as they are among certain social elements in the British West Indies, their use may be abruptly terminated as a symbolic statement

[23] Richard and Sally Price, "Saramaka Onomastics: An Afro-American Naming System," *Ethnology,* 11 (1972), 341–367.

[24] Richard Antoun, "On the Significance of Names in an Arab Village," *Ethnology,* 7 (1968), 158–170.

[25] Ward Goodenough, "Personal Names and Modes of Address in Two Oceanic Societies," in *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology,* ed. M. E. Spiro (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

upon conversion to a religious way of life. As Frank Manning notes, "the non-use of nicknames is part of the symbolic repertory through which the converted churchgoer expresses his separateness from the wilder society."[26]

There is little agreement on this point, other than the broad generalization that the use of nicknames, especially as a means of personal address, is often problematic.[27] Even so, nicknames often constitute an essential naming resource. In Kamsá society, as in the Scottish highlands and Zinacantan, accurate personal reference would be difficult without recourse to nicknames.[28]

Nicknaming traditions typically project some part of the descriptive backing into the name content. The tone may be ironic or sincere. In the former case, the name must be decoded before any correct idea of bearer's identity can be adduced from the manifest descriptive backing. The propositions selected for foregrounding in the nickname are often unflattering. Even when they are not taken to be unflattering, they still represent an unorthodox mode of description. In the British West Indies, the nicknames "identify a person with the heroic world of entertainment, sport, and verbal virtuosity."[29] These qualities are not perceived as negative by the users, who even list their nicknames in the phone book. Yet these identity tags do not employ the more orthodox descriptive features concerned with place of birth, family, occupation, residence, and so forth.

The descriptive backing which is foregrounded in the nickname is not only unorthodox, but it is also individualizing rather than classificatory.[30] Nicknames seize on identifying elements that set their referents apart as in some way aberrant. The contrast intended here is evident in the Kamsá garden name and ugly name. The garden name assigns its referent to broad sociological categories such as father, husband, woman, daughter. The ugly name characterizes its bearer in terms of qualities he or she either possesses uniquely, or possesses in common with only a select group of individuals.

[26] Frank Manning, "Nicknames and Number Plates in the British West Indies," *Journal of American Folklore,* 87 (1974), 130.

[27] See George Foster, "Speech Forms and Perception of Social Distance in a Spanish-Speaking Mexican Village," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology,* 20 (1964), 107–122; Bruce Jackson, "Prison Nicknames," *Western Folklore,* 26 (1967), 48–54; José Limón, "The Folk Performance of Chicano and the Cultural Limits of Political Ideology," in *Language and Speech in American Society,* ed. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer (Austin: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1980).

[28] Nancy Dorian, "A Substitute Name System in the Scottish Highlands," *American Anthropologist,* 72 (1970), 303–319; George Collier and Victoria Bricker, "Nicknames and Social Structure in Zinacantan," *American Anthropologist,* 72 (1970), 289–302.

[29] Manning, p. 130.

[30] Goodenough.

Nicknames establish a naming convention without the benefit of an institutionalized procedure for performative nomination. As Manning suggests, "the conferral of nicknames is typically a serendipitous event."[31] Nicknames are proposed by would-be name givers, but only oral tradition can confer the seal of acceptance. One major element in the acceptance of a given nickname is its aesthetic appeal. As we have seen, the aesthetic character of Kamsá ugly names resides in their brevity, acoustic texture, allusiveness, and piquancy. To date, little attention has been devoted to verbal artistry in the nickname, although the present analysis suggests that nicknaming traditions may reflect the aesthetic tastes of the communities in which they obtain.

Two central elements in a semiotic of nicknaming have emerged from our discussion of the Kamsá naming system and survived a preliminary comparison with other nicknaming traditions. First, the descriptive backing which is generally available on demand in the case of proper names rises to the surface in the nickname to become a part of the semantic content of the name. Second, in the absence of an institutionalized procedure for performative nomination, the nickname earns its own way into oral tradition by virtue of its native aesthetic qualities.

A number of other elements characterize the ugly name semiotic, and may well prove relevant to the discussion of other nicknaming traditions. These include (1) prohibition of the ugly name as a term of address; (2) the presentation of an unorthodox descriptive backing; (3) supplementation of the manifest descriptive backing by etiological narratives describing how the bearer got the name; and (4) conferral of a trickster aura on the bearer. Further investigation along the lines developed here will surely enhance our understanding of nicknaming traditions and their position within their host naming systems. We can anticipate an eventual typology of nicknaming practices, founded on the stipulation of obligatory and variable elements within the nickname semiotic.

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[31] Manning, p. 124.

APPENDIX

The Kamsá phonological system is provided below:

Consonants

	Labial	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar
Stop vl.	p	t			k
Obstruent vd.	b	d			g
Affricate vl.		ts	tx	ch	
Fricative vl.		s	x	sh	
Nasal vd.	m	n		n	
Lateral vd.		l		ll	
Vibrant vd.		r			
Semivowel vd.	w			y	

Vowels

	High	Low
Front	i	e
Central	e	a
Back	u	o